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EPA

A Guide to Principal Threat and Low Level Threat Wastes

Office of Emergency and Remedial Response
Hazardous Site Control Division OS-220W

Quick Reference Fact Sheet

The National Oil and Hazardous Substances Pollution Contingency Plan (NCP) promulgated on March 8, 1990 states that EPA expects to use "treatment to address the principal threats posed by a site, wherever practicable" and "engineering controls, such as containment, for waste that poses a relatively low long-term threat." (40 CFR Section 300.430(a)(1)(iii).) These expectations, derived from the mandates of CERCLA §121 and based on previous Superfund experience, were developed as guidelines to communicate the types of remedies that the EPA generally anticipates to find appropriate for specific types of wastes. Although remedy selection decisions are ultimately site-specific determinations based on an analysis of remedial alternatives using the nine evaluation criteria, these expectations help to streamline and focus the remedial investigation/feasibility study (RI/FS) on appropriate waste management options. **This guide explains considerations that should be taken into account in categorizing waste for which treatment or containment generally will be suitable and provides definitions, examples, and ROD documentation requirements related to waste that constitute a principal or low level threat.** EPA makes this categorization of waste as principal or low level threat waste after deciding whether to take remedial action at a site. The "Interim Final Guidance on Preparing Superfund Decision Documents," (EPA/624/1-87/90, October 1990) and "A Guide to Developing Superfund Records of Decision" (Publication 9335.3-02FS-1, May 1990) provide additional information on ROD documentation.

NCP Expectations

EPA established general expectations in the NCP (40 CFR 300.430(a)(1)(iii)) to inform the public of the types of remedies that EPA has found to be appropriate for certain types of waste in the past and anticipates selecting in the future. These expectations (see Highlight 1) provide a means of sharing collected experience to guide the development of cleanup options. They reflect EPA's belief that certain source materials are addressed best through treatment because of technical limitations to the long-term reliability of containment technologies, or the serious consequences of exposure should a release occur. Conversely, these expectations also reflect the fact that other source materials can be safely contained and that treatment for all waste will not be appropriate or necessary to ensure protection of human health and the environment, nor cost effective.

Identifying Principal and Low Level Threat Wastes

The concept of principal threat waste and low level threat waste as developed by EPA in the NCP is to be applied on a site-specific basis when characterizing source material. "Source material" is defined as material that includes or contains hazardous substances, pollutants or contaminants that act as a reservoir for migration of contamination to ground water, to surface water, to air, or acts as a source for direct exposure.

HIGHLIGHT 1: NCP Expectations Involving Principal and Low Level Threat Wastes

EPA expects to:

1. Use treatment to address the principal threats posed by a site, wherever practicable.
2. Use engineering controls, such as containment, for wastes that pose a relatively low long-term threat or where treatment is impracticable.
3. Use a combination of methods, as appropriate, to achieve protection of human health and the environment. In appropriate site situations, treatment of principal threats posed by a site, with priority placed on treating waste that is liquid, highly toxic or highly mobile, will be combined with engineering controls (such as containment) and institutional controls, as appropriate, for treatment residuals and untreated waste.
4. Use institutional controls such as water use and deed restrictions to supplement engineering controls as appropriate for short- and long-term management to prevent or limit exposure to hazardous substances.

Contaminated ground water generally is not considered to be a source material although non-aqueous phase liquids (NAPLs) may be viewed as source materials. The NCP establishes a different expectation for remediating contaminated ground water (i.e., to return usable ground waters to their beneficial uses in a time frame that is reasonable given the particular circumstances of the site). Examples of source and non-source materials are provided in Highlight 2.

HIGHLIGHT 2: Examples of Source and Non-Source Materials

Source Materials

- Drummed wastes
- Contaminated soil and debris
- "Pools" of dense non-aqueous phase liquids (NAPLs) submerged beneath ground water or in fractured bedrock
- NAPLs floating on ground water
- Contaminated sediments and sludges

Non-Source Materials

- Ground water
- Surface water
- Residuals resulting from treatment of site materials

Principal threat wastes are those source materials considered to be highly toxic or highly mobile that generally cannot be reliably contained or would present a significant risk to human health or the environment should exposure occur. They include liquids and other highly mobile materials (e.g., solvents) or materials having high concentrations of toxic compounds. No "threshold level" of toxicity/risk has been established to equate to "principal threat." However, where toxicity and mobility of source material combine to pose a potential risk of 10^{-3} or greater, generally treatment alternatives should be evaluated.

Low level threat wastes are those source materials that generally can be reliably contained and that would present only a low risk in the event of release. They include source materials that exhibit low toxicity, low mobility in the environment, or are near health-based levels.

Determinations as to whether a source material is a principal or low level threat waste should be based on the inherent toxicity as well as a consideration of the physical state of the material (e.g., liquid), the potential mobility of the wastes in the particular environmental setting, and the lability and degradation products of the material. However, this concept of principal and low level threat waste should not necessarily be equated with the risks posed by site contaminants via various exposure pathways. Although the characterization of some material as principal or low level threats takes into account toxicity (and is thus related to degree of risk posed assuming exposure occurs), characterizing a waste as a principal threat does not mean that the waste poses the primary risk at the site. For example, buried drums leaking solvents into ground water would be considered a principal threat waste, yet the primary risk at the site assuming no direct contact threats could be ingestion of contaminated ground water, which as discussed above is not considered to be a source material, and thus would not be categorized as a principal threat.

The identification of principal and low level threats is made on a site-specific basis. In some situations site wastes will not be readily classifiable as either a principal or low level threat waste, and thus no general expectations on how best to manage these source materials of moderate toxicity and mobility will necessarily apply. [NOTE: *In these situations wastes do not have to be characterized as either one or the other. The principal threat/low level threat waste concept and the NCP expectations were established to help streamline and focus the remedy selection process, not as a mandatory waste classification requirement.*]

HIGHLIGHT 3: Examples of Principal and Low Level Threat Wastes

Wastes that generally will be considered to constitute principal threats include, but are not limited to:

- Liquids - waste contained in drums, lagoons or tanks, free product (NAPLs) floating on or under ground water (generally excluding ground water containing contaminants of concern).
- Mobile source material - surface soil or subsurface soil containing high concentrations of contaminants of concern that are (or potentially are) mobile due to wind entrainment, volatilization (e.g., VOCs), surface runoff, or sub-surface transport.
- Highly-toxic source material - buried drummed non-liquid wastes, buried tanks containing non liquid wastes, or soils containing significant concentrations of highly toxic materials.

Waste that generally will be considered to constitute low level threat wastes include, but are not limited to:

- Non-mobile contaminated source material of low to moderate toxicity - Surface soil containing contaminants of concern that generally are relatively immobile in air or ground water (i.e., non-liquid, low volatility, low leachability contaminants such as high molecular weight compounds) in the specific environmental setting.
- Low toxicity source material - soil and subsurface soil concentrations not greatly above reference dose levels or that present an excess cancer risk near the acceptable risk range.

Examples of principal and low level threat wastes are provided in Highlight 3.

Risk Management Decisions fo Principal and Low Level Threat Wastes

The categorization of source material as a principal threat or low level threat waste, and the expectations regarding the use of treatment and containment technologies follows the fundamental decision as to whether any remedial action is required at a site. These determinations, and the application of the expectations, serve as general guidelines and do not dictate the selection of a particular remedial alternative. For example, EPA's experience has demonstrated that highly mobile wastes (e.g., liquids) are difficult to reliably contain and thus generally need to be treated. As such, EPA expects alternatives leveloped to address highly mobile material to focus on treatment options rather that containment approaches.

However, as stated in the preamble to the NCP (55 FR at 8703, March 8, 1990), there may be situations where wastes identified as constituting a principal threat may be contained rather than treated due to difficulties in treating the wastes. Specific situations that may limit the use of treatment include:

- Treatment technologies are not technically feasible or are not available within a reasonable time frame;
- The extraordinary volume of materials or complexity of the site make implementation of treatment technologies impracticable;
- Implementation of a treatment-based remedy would result in greater overall risk to human health and the environment due to risks posed to workers or the surrounding community during implementation; or
- Severe effects across environmental media resulting from implementation would occur

Conversely, there may be situations where treatment will be selected for both principal threat wastes and low level threat wastes. For example, once a decision has been made to treat some wastes (e.g., in an onsite incinerator) economies of scale may make it cost effective to treat all materials including low level threat wastes to alleviate or minimize the need for engineering/institutional controls.

While these expectations may guide the development of appropriate alternatives, the fact that a remedy is consistent with the expectations does not constitute sufficient grounds for the selection of that remedial alternative. The selection of an appropriate waste management strategy is determined solely through the remedy selection process outlined in the NCP (i.e., all remedy selection decisions are site-specific and must be based on a comparative analysis of the alternatives using nine criteria in accordance with the NCP). Independent of the expectations, selected remedies must be protective, ARAR compliant, cost-effective, and use permanent solutions or treatment to the maximum extent practicable. Once the final remedy is selected, consistency with the NCP expectations should be discussed as part of the documented rationale for the decision.

ROD Documentation

Declaration

The "Description of the Selected Remedy" section should note whether the remedy is addressing any source materials that constitute "principal" or "low level" threat wastes, or both.

The "Statutory Determinations" section should discuss how the selected remedy satisfies the statutory preference stated in CERCLA §121 to select remedial actions "in which treatment which permanently and significantly reduces the volume, toxicity or mobility of the hazardous substances, pollutants, and contaminants is a principal element." In evaluating this statutory preference, the site manager needs to decide whether treatment selected in the ROD constitutes treatment as a major component of the remedy for that site. Remedies which involve treatment of principal threat wastes likely will satisfy the statutory preference for treatment as a principal element, although this will not necessarily be true in all cases (e.g., when principal threat wastes that are treated represent only a small fraction of the wastes managed through containment). Ground water treatment remedies also may satisfy the statutory preference, even though contaminated ground water is not considered a principal threat waste and even though principal threat source material may not be treated.

Decision Summary

The "Decision Summary" of the ROD should identify those source materials that have been identified as principal threat and/or low level threat wastes, and the basis for these designations. These designations should be provided in the "Summary of Site Characteristics" section as part of the discussion focusing on these source materials that pose or potentially pose a risk to human health and the environment. In addition, the "Description of Alternatives" and the "Selection of Remedy" sections should briefly note how principal and/or low level threat wastes that may have been identified are being managed.

The "Statutory Determinations" section of the ROD should include a discussion of how the statutory preference for treatment as a principal element is satisfied or explain why it is not satisfied, stating reasons in terms of the nine evaluation criteria.

NOTICE: The policies set out in this memorandum are intended solely as guidance. They are not intended, nor can they be relied upon, to create any rights enforceable by any party in litigation with the United States. EPA officials may decide to follow the guidance provided in this memorandum, or to act at variance with the guidance, based on an analysis of specific site circumstances. The Agency also reserves the right to change this guidance at any time without public notice.

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